

February

Bad years



Zero Philosophy
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Because they took time, and noticed it, his thoughts always came back to the calendar. Each return brought renewed grief. His existence was framed by monstrosity. He could not comprehend how a cultural calamity of such magnitude had taken place, or not been prevented. What had those involved in shaping it thought of their work? Did they not see what was happening? How had they not been aghast at it?

It sickened him to a degree that was functionally degrading. The contemplation it demanded was the source of a chronic, feverish derailing of intelligence. In particular, it was the hideous illogic of the month lengths that appalled him, almost beyond tolerance. Each day he said ‘no’ to it, ineffectually. Each day, too, some existential capacity came closer to collapse. The time would come when it could no longer be endured.

“This can’t go on,” he said. “It’s too blatantly wrong. It’s insolence.”

“Who’s insulting whom?”

He sighed, as if the question compounded the insult. “The framework of time is abusing everyone who dwells in it.”

“Yet scarcely anyone seems to experience it that way.”

“Then they’re wrong, too.”

“Have you told them that?”

“Repeatedly,” he said.

“How do they respond?”

“With evasion, almost always,” he said, after pausing to think about it. “They minimize the problem, or pretend not to see it.”

“I have to doubt they’re pretending.”

“You think it’s mad to care,” he realized.

“Honestly?”

He nodded.

“It’s not the word I’d use, of course,” she said in qualification.

“But still.”

“It betrays striking cognitive abnormality. I’m sure you have the insight to see that.”

Every time she said this he bridled at the distraction. *Of course* calendric integrity was an abnormality. That was exactly the problem. She was merely restating the deep cultural calamity as if its sheer existence was the excuse for itself. It was not that it merited no response. Rather, the dispute was already the response. Normality was a mistake.

It was the third day of February, a Wednesday. The weather was miserable, but he didn’t care about that. It wasn’t a matter of what happened in February. It was February.

“This vile stunted malignancy,” he said.

“February?” she wondered. She knew it probably had to be.

“What is the most badly-constructed prison you’ve ever occupied? Do you know that ‘joke’?”

“February, again,” she guessed.

“February,” he agreed. “Fuck, how do you bear it? How is it acceptable?”

She shrugged. “No one thinks it matters much, or thinks about it much at all.”

He reacted to the words almost as if to a slap. In the fraction of a second before he mastered his features, they registered wounded disbelief.

“Are you serious?” he asked. “The calendar organizes our lives.”

“In some formal sense, I guess.” She shrugged again. It was almost as if his anguish amused her.

“You have to accept that it’s an exotic obsession.”

They were back to that again. It returned like a warped season.

“Seven doesn’t divide any relevant number. The arbitrariness is,” he groped for the word,

“dismaying.”

“I thought you were a Christian.”

“You think I’m contending against God, like an Israelite?”

“Aren’t you? Scripture is unambiguous on this point.”

It was a difficult thrust to parry. Fifty-two times seven wasn’t a terrible approximation of the year, but to admit that was already to have set out down a bad road. It was to be captured by something profoundly broken that was only not quite the worst.

“The foundations are so weak.”

“Is that a pun?” She raised an eyebrow disapprovingly.

“If so, it’s not mine,” he said.

“God’s then?”

“You don’t find that plausible?”

“Under the circumstances, it would be weird.”

“God disparaging his own work, you mean?”

“Quite,” she said, as if to close the digression.

He sighed. “All the best threads bore you.”

“Those leading nowhere do.”

“Isn’t it strange how easily the blasphemy of the two-day weekend was accepted?”

It was as if the moderns had sought a way back out of confusion, to the Pentad.

Questioning seven led nowhere because the better turnings had been missed so long before. They haunted him like grave, dead gods. Vast spectral ruins recalled a less entirely fallen world. He shuddered beneath the lash of their unknown glories.

“Why does nobody ever seem to have tried seventy-three times five?”

Perhaps the history of the calendar harbored no greater mystery. If seventy-three had been a challenging basic number for ancient peoples to reach, five certainly had not been. The number

most readily at hand had never been employed to carve the year. The five seasons had been left undiscovered.

“It would have been off by less than six hours a year,” he added. This was as good as the pre-Julian Roman year – as good as any regular year – but this time, instead, well-constructed. Often he had sheltered, awe-stricken, in the virtual shadow of its five Great Months. Such wonder that had not been.

He was allowing her to get to him. “The difference is, you don’t think there’s a better way of doing it. In fact, you assume – very strongly – that there isn’t.”

“Here’s what I actually think,” she countered. “When you say ‘better’ you mean something that would usually be found odd, and upon deeper investigation found untenable.”

“By ‘better’ I mean more logical, elegant, and economical.”

“I’ll tell you why this sounds like a revolt against reality. Fundamentally, calendric irregularities are astronomical. They’re *facts*. They’re not conceptually soluble.”

“It’s complicated,” he accepted, grudgingly.

“Not really,” she insisted. “Realism – empirical measurement – involves inelegant, irrational numbers. The ideal of tidiness is a factual error. If you want a neat calendar you want a false world.”

“You seem very sure.”

“What is there here to be sure about? The Julian calendar is neater than the Gregorian *because* it’s less accurate. Where’s the opening for controversy in this?”

“Yet the ugliest deformities of the Julian calendar have nothing to do with concessions to inaccuracy.”

“Ah,” she allowed. “You mean February?”

“February in particular,” he confirmed. “It’s the most graphic case. Still, February isn’t the end of it, but only the most lurid, grotesque example of a general disorder.”

“A ‘disorder’ based upon astro-dynamic facts, and especially upon the relation of the earth’s spin to its orbit, as well as the orbit of its satellite, which is to say the terrestrial day to the year, and the month,” she reminded him. “None of which is numerically tractable, even in principle.”

“Nothing in astro-dynamics recommends the division of the month or the year by seven,” he noted, stubbornly.

“So we’re back to that?”

“No, I’m saying they didn’t really try septal. They didn’t *use* seven, didn’t work with it. Seven long months, or short seasons, missing only something fractionally under a day and a quarter of intercalation – that’s a plausible year. But to do that means taking fifty-two seriously, as a calendric building block, which was never done.”

“There’s no week, if you do that,” she pointed out. “You’re not using seven biblically.”

“Then keep the seven day week, times thirteen, times four. That gives exactly four seasons, each of thirteen weeks or ninety-one days.”

“Why not thirteen twenty-eight day months, which is what we did?”

“If we did that, why are there only twelve months?”

Only reluctantly did he revert to this. It surrendered almost everything. The very best year it permitted was an ugly shambles.

“History,” she said, with a shrug. “It’s a legacy of Sumerian arithmetical preferences. Once again, as always, there’s no neat answer. Neatness belongs to another sphere.”

She’d missed a level of irony. Twelve was itself the neat answer. Geometrical tractability favored and promoted it. Division into quarters had been found convenient, to break time on the rack of space.

Stumbling upon compound numbers in matters calendric is always a bad sign. They indicate redundant regularity and imposition of the Idea. It is like seeing a jig-saw puzzle made from rectangular tiles. Discovery is compromised.

“Sixty,” he muttered. The word drowned in a bitter laugh.

“Hating the Sumerians doesn’t help.”

“Nothing helps,” he accepted. Path dependency was the true prison. The time-cage they built was only strengthened in its dilapidation. As it crumbled, it left the outside ever further elsewhere.

“Ninety, plus eighty-one, plus seventy-two, plus sixty-three, plus fifty-four,” she reminded him. The Sumerians had not arrived from nowhere. But he was in no mood for it.

“A missing month, yes,” he acknowledged sadly. It might be no more than that. At least, nothing else offered purchase. They had reached the Pedestrian Tolerable Year, or the Vulgar Non-Moronic Year, as it was alternatively known. In rudimentary technical terms, alone, it was twice as bad as the Zygotriadic Yera, but of that he would not now speak, or try even to think.

The common playing cards were a secret – if vulgar – calendar. Each card corresponded to a regular week, with suits for seasons. Because it missed the natural year by roughly 1.2425 days, there was a Joker, whose meaning was correction.

“Let’s talk intercalations,” he said. She could have no objection to the topic, in which erratic reality was addressed.

Any way of ordering the year would be messy, or more specifically *ragged*. Make it a little short, and there will be remainders. Thus, a good calendric year narrowly undershoots the astronomical year, such that the discrepancy can be made up by intercalations. In these all error is concentrated. If allotted to an annex or appendix, set at the end of the year, the year is not disturbed by them.

It had not been done that way. February was a repulsive runt, but that was not the only thing. It was also the locus of intercalation, in the second to worst possible place. It injected intercalary disturbance into the year at an early point, sending a wave of irregularity through every leap year, disordering it.

Which days of the year does each month contain? Due to February, the question cannot neatly be answered. In some years March consists of the sixtieth through ninetieth days of the year, but in others not (due to February).

“You have to see how wrong this is,” he demanded of her, once again. “It’s nothing less than permanently installed collective insanity. Every four years, except for three times every four centuries, February fluctuates, fucking the last five-sixths of the year to Hell.”

Perhaps most absurdly, the unit of four centuries, the base module of time for over four hundred years, didn’t even have a name. History proceeded in these blocks, unremarked. It was as if it was ashamed to mention itself.

“Calendric order is worthy of preservation now?”

“The city’s a wreck anyway, so why not also throw in an earthquake?”

“Look,” she admitted. “There’s no real defense of this, except that it doesn’t matter. People even find it charming.”

“You’re joking?”

“Irregularity can be attractive.”

Once the grim path into the Vulgar Non-Moronic Year had been taken, the critical decision had been *months or seasons*. Four weeks each month, or four seasons each year? ‘Why not both?’ had been the idiot response, breaking everything.

“Literal lunacy,” he muttered.

Everyone in the world, it seemed, had fallen prey to it, if in very different ways. A year made of months was a double-weave of disorder. Its moon-struck creators had threaded two intractable magnitudes into each other, devastating any prospect of elegantly handling either one.

Strung out upon the year were lumps of indigestible gristle, twelve or thirteen, who could even count them? Their uneven lengths measured nothing of real significance. The petty vanities of Roman emperors still reverberated though them.

January comes first. Its name attests, from the beginning, and almost tauntingly, to a missed zygonomic principle. Thirty-one, the number of its days, is a prime number of special dignity, but in the terrestrial calendar it has no sensible place.

Then February limps in, part dwarf, part joker. The manifold sins of the calendar-makers are condensed in it, to the point of parody. It is a month that might have been designed to disgrace the order of time.

“Whenever February comes around you get like this,” she said.

“I get like this? What about February?”

“February is okay.”

He would never understand her.

Notes

The Gregorian calendar subtracts three leap years every four centuries. Within this period module, it schedules 97 leap years, rather than the 100 of the Julian calendar. Its fundamental calendric module is thus a block of four-hundred years, encompassing 146,097 days, averaging

$146,097 / 400 = 365.2425$ days a year. Within this time-span, the accuracy of the Gregorian calendar cannot be improved upon.

Yet the actual (mean solar) year is shorter. Even after trimming-back the Julian year by 0.0075 days, the Gregorian year still overshoots astronomical time by roughly 0.00033 days. It thus gains a little under one day every three millennia.

The length of the year is not only metrically intractable but also inconstant. Its length is gradually increasing as the earth's rotation is slowed by lunar tidal forces.

There are many types of month, Anomalistic, Draconic, Legal, Sidereal, Synodic, and Tropical, among others. The 'month' determined by English common law lasts exactly twenty-eight days (or four weeks). A Synodic month, or complete cycle of lunar phases, has an irregular and variable length of between twenty-nine and thirty days, averaging 29.53.

2 Comments



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 **M(ileto) E-** Feb 8, 2021

haha what this

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 **anon** Feb 16, 2021

In 2021 the EU voted to abolish the practice of daylight saving time, maybe someday humanity will smooth out the calendar and implement a newer, more regular one. Maybe not.

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